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ABSTRACT

The debate about the use of Black English has been raging for many years, with no real solutions and few practical suggestions to help teachers and African-American students handle the situation in the classroom. Tensions are often heightened by misconceptions about Standard English--that it is a White man's language and necessary for success and that African-American students must surrender part of their culture to succeed. Americans equate being different with being ignorant and deprived, especially when it comes to the English language. Consequently, many African-American students are found in English remedial classes where most of them do not actually belong. Recognizing that there is a Black dialect as well as a standard one can be a starting point for educators to teach Standard English to African-American students as a second dialect. When students make mistakes in speaking and writing Standard English, they must realize that they are making mistakes in a dialect other than their own. College students are capable of understanding the differences if explanations follow. Small children are difficult to motivate using the logic of jobs and world communication, but not college students. In composition classes, personal conferences are very effective, and better for the students than remedial classes. Bidialectalism is an achievable goal at the college level--it is the functional value of the standard dialect that should be emphasized. Language and culture are inseparable. Students cannot be forced to choose, but the goal should be communication beyond the neighborhood. (NKA)

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Black or Standard English : An African American Student's False Dilemma

Almost all of us educators are now aware of the issue of Black English; it has been a subject of much research. Over the years many solutions concerning the teaching of Standard English to our African-American students have been presented and as many of them rejected as ineffective or even offensive. As far back as the early 70s for example, Burling offered and explored the pros and cons of four very practical alternatives:

1. Wiping out Nonstandard English
2. Teaching Nonstandard English to Standard speakers
3. Leaving the dialect alone
4. Encouraging bidialectalism.

He rejected the first two and called for a compromise on the last two. But up to now, the debate is still raging around those four leaving us in the classrooms with very few practical suggestions to help us and our African-American students handle the situation. And tensions are often heightened by misconceptions around Standard English such as that English, which is a basic ingredient in a recipe for success, is a white man's language, that that white man's language is superior to theirs, that inorder to learn that white man's language, and consequently be a success, they must give up a part of their culture. These misconceptions confuse, frustrate, and at times

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literally devastate College African- American students because they are mature enough to deliberate them and their implications. As educators, I think we can help both ourselves and our African-American students clear those misconceptions and feel comfortable in writing classes by fostering pride in their language, explaining differences between Black English and Standard English and differentiating between Standard English and the English spoken by most whites in America.

At a time when African-Americans are stressing the need for an identity, it is important that African-American students develop confidence and pride in their language, and feel secure using it. In one of his essays "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is", Baldwin describes language as "the most vivid and crucial key to identity: It reveals the private identity, and connects one with, or divorces one from, the larger public, or communal identity"(113). Fostering our students' pride in their language shouldn't be all that difficult; among other things, the most important aspect it calls for is an attitude change from the public, of course starting with the teachers. As Burling points out: "Americans usually assume that some ways of speaking are correct and others incorrect"(26). They equate being different with being ignorant and deprived, especially when it comes to the English language; if you do not talk exactly like I do, you must be ignorant of the English language; you cannot possibly know English. Consequently, many African-American students are found in English remedial classes where most of them do not actually belong. Our students want to be listened to and understood for what they are. They want their language and their experiences validated not despised, ignored or worse still rubbed out; all we need to do is encourage them to express themselves first the way they know how. Then they should be assured that no language or dialect has ever been proved to be structurally superior or

better than any other. Respect for each other's way of talking is all this calls for. Our students already know that they are different and we will make their task of accepting differences easier if we respect those differences, beginning with the way they talk.

Once the students are culturally aware of their dialect and confident that there is nothing wrong with that dialect, then educators can comfortably point out differences between that dialect and Standard English, especially when mistakes occur along those lines, without feeling awkward or thinking that one is embarrassing the student. We do not need to tip toe around the subject; one time I heard an instructor calling 'black English' a "homey" dialect inorder to avoid saying 'Black' English; she thought I would be offended; this is pathetic. Most African -American students do not, or rather cannot, differentiate between Standard English and Black English; for them the two are one and the same. Recognizing that there is a black dialect as well as a standard one can be a very good starting point for us to teach standard English to our African-American students as a second dialect. So long as they think that they are speaking, writing and generally using "English", we are not going to get very far with them by just pointing out the mistakes they make in Standard English. They have to realize that they are making mistakes in a dialect other than their own; otherwise they will think that we are confronting them and questioning their ability to use their language. And as one of our colleagues at UT-Chattanooga pointed out, if you question an individual's ability to use one's language, you are questioning that individual's human experience. And Baldwin confirms that when he says: "it is not the black child's language that is in question, it is not his language that is despised: It is his experience" (115). Thomas B. Kochman too stresses the same point when he says: "A speaker's native dialect has cultural value for him and is not to be tampered with"(135). So long as we continue to correct our African-

American students when they make mistakes without giving them full personal explanations, they will simply reject the dialect we are trying to enforce. Johnson noted that "Standard English is often taught as a replacement dialect rather than an alternate dialect"(144), and our students reject that approach. It translates to them like we are trying to rub out their identity completely by teaching them a 'superior' dialect, and what they need most at that stage is an identity to help them face the world out of college, not an effacement.

Being able to explain differences between the two dialects will require some effort on our side; we have to know a bit about the structure of Black English in order to identify mistakes arising out of that dialect and explain those mistakes satisfactorily to a very alert college audience. As Labov put it, "the key to the situation ... is for the teacher to know the grammatical differences that separate the teacher's speech from that of the student.... If the teacher has no understanding of the child's grammar.. she may be arguing with him at cross purposes"(115). Dialect can indeed be a deterrent to effective communication. We are not being required to speak the language; we only need to understand and respect it because as Abrahams notes: "Nothing is more effective in destroying the beauty and vitality of black English than to anglicize it"(166).

We are not giving our college students enough credit; if we clearly explain the differences to them, they for sure will understand them. What surprises me is the tendency to want to change the general English tests at the lower levels when our African-American students perform poorly on them. May be some aspects of these tests need to be changed; but then so do our teaching methods. Think about it, when American students perform poorly in Mathematics tests on an international scale, we call for more aggressive teaching methods, but when African-American students perform poorly on our national tests, we call for a change in the tests, and we leave our

teaching methods intact claiming that the tests are unfair because "it ain't even our game"(Smitherman 20); we are missing the point; Standard English is every human being's game if we accept the premise by Mabe that "As the 20th.C. winds down, English is the closest thing to a world language the earth has ever had"(112), Standard, not regional English.

And so, finally, African American students need to be made aware that there is still a difference between Standard English and the English spoken by most American Whites. Some African-American students at the University level resist Standard English simply because they've been made to think of it as the 'white'man's language and they feel that adopting it will be an open betrayal of their culture. According to Jones, it is a "depressing reality that for many blacks, standard English is not only unfamiliar, it is socially unacceptable"(117). Consequently, often when an African-American student makes an effort to use standard English, especially in speech, one is shunned by peers as Jones acknowledges: "Because of the way I talk, some of my black peers look at me sideways and ask, 'why do you talk like you're white?'" (116). We should make our students notice that first of all not all whites 'talk', let alone 'sound'the same, and so accusations of 'you are one of them', 'you talk white' or 'you sound white' are unfounded and basically meaningless. As Jones elaborately put it, the response should be "I don't think I talk white, I think I talk right"(118). Secondly, if all whites excelled in the use of standard English, our remedial classes would be a 100% non-whites, but we all know as well as our students do that that is not always the case. Thirdly, Standard English is an international language of communication and no-one group of people can claim prerogative over it; it is "a neutral English... It's nobody's language"(Mabe 108), and our students should know that. Small children are difficult to motivate using the logic of jobs and world communication, but College students

should understand that logic. They should be aiming at being understood by the 750 million daily speakers of English all over the world, not only by white Americans (Mabe 102). For functional purposes and global cross-cultural communication, it is "English as an International Language" that we are advocating (Allen 5).

Many proposals look good on paper but are often difficult to implement and this one may be no exception. How can a composition teacher with 25 students of varied backgrounds in one classroom afford to spend time fostering pride in African-American students, explaining differences between the two dialects and differentiating between Standard English and white man's language? For starters, personal conferences can be very effective. Since not every African-American student we have needs that attention, the one-to-one basis can work very well. And when it comes to extending invitations to students to visit with you in your office hours, encourage those who really need it to do so; often all our students need is personal attention, a friendly invitation to an instructor's office. There needs to be open, honest dialogue between students and their teachers about the students' work and experiences. It may need extra effort and time but it is worth it as you watch a student's confidence level rise to meet the culturally mixed classroom challenge. Let's do it the Dean Winters' way, one student at a time. This one to one contact is far much better for them than remedial classes, because most of the time, we are not dealing with remedial students!! Also an instructor's attitude can do more than any formal instruction to alleviate the situation. None of us can learn from people who despise us and our experience; all it takes is a positive attitude.

There definitely should be no cultural conflict involved when it comes to the issue of Black and Standard English; the two issues are separate and should be kept that way. To link the two

is to simply put our students in a false dilemma situation. Am I advocating bidialectalism as was advocated in the early 70's only to be rejected as ineffective and difficult? If it can help, why not. The argument that it can't be done or it is difficult bothers me since often times the people making such an argument are themselves bidialectals; they know very well when to switch codes. Standard English is not a foreign language to our African-American students, and should not be taught as such, but it is different enough to be recognized as a distinct dialect, and not talking about these differences is not going to make them disappear. Labov is quoted by Jones as saying that "It is the goal of most black Americans to acquire full control of the standard language without giving up their own culture"(115), I couldn't agree more. But our students are not going to master both dialects if they are torn between those for the convenience of this discussion I will refer to as the accommodists and the resistors. In my reading, I discovered that there are educators who are willing to encourage our students to master both dialects, and those who call for resistance. Bidialectalism is an achievable goal at the college level because a student at that level can understand what is at stake; it is the functional value of the standard dialect that we should emphasize at this level. Our students need to learn to switch dialects as appropriate; they need goals and aspirations, and a college student can achieve that. To put it in Prof. Locke's terms :"It's OK (for our students) to rap as long as they can talk stocks and bonds on Wall Street."

For an African-American student, it is not an either nor issue, both are possible because they are two, separate, different dialects. There is no choice for our students to make here. One's language and one's culture are inseparable; we cannot deny our students their culture by forcing them to choose, but we also cannot consciously set them up for failure in the international circles

by concentrating on regional scruples. The goal should be communication beyond one's neigborhood.

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